**WRITING A TIMED ESSAY TEST: checklist for success**

HOW TO PREPARE/STUDY FOR A TIMED WRITING TEST…

**Study what you have learned about the following:**

* Sentence structures (all 4 of them)
* Pronoun references & agreements
* Subject-Verb Agreements

**Study the handouts on timed writing strategies, introductions, conclusions, and effective paragraphs (expository).**

* Note strategies that will help you overcome your specific challenges, such as writing an introduction last.
* Choose 3-5 introduction and conclusion strategies and memorize these concepts.
* Study the difference between generalizations and specific details—help you to remember to balance them.
* Practice, practice, practice writing body paragraphs especially, or any part of an essay you have trouble with.

**Write as many practice tests as possible & evaluate each using the following requirements and compare essays.**

I may be able to give you feedback (there is not always time in my schedule, but you can request an appointment with me—I will do my absolute best to find a time before the test and that works for us.)

* If you know someone who gives good feedback—a friend, roommate, classmate, mentor, etc.—ask him/her to review your essay and give feedback.
* Find a partner in class who you trust to give you quality, critical, and honest feedback and arrange with him/her to write and exchange practice tests so you can give each other feedback.

WHEN THE TEST BEGINS…

**Are you sure that you fully understand the prompt question?**

* What is the lead-in to the writing assignment and what does it tell you that is important for your essay?
* What exactly is the question or questions you need to answer in your essay?
* Are there any limitations about content or approach? (and/or, anything you are advised to avoid, etc.)
* ASK ANY QUESTIONS BEFORE THE TIME BEGINS! You will be given an opportunity to ask me questions to help you understand the prompt BEFORE the test time begins—don’t waste your test time to ask questions! Ignore your shyness and say, “Hey, Leah! Help me! I don’t understand!” (I can delay the test beginning time until your questions are answered—don’t be afraid to ask, ask quickly, and listen to what I explain to other students because you may get your question answered without even having to ask.

DURING THE TEST…

**Manage time wisely & pace yourself**

* It might be helpful to note approximate time limits for writing each of your paragraphs so you know when to move on to the next one.
* You will have only 45 minutes: use up to 10 minutes to outline and plan, at least 30 minutes to write the essay, and reserve 10 minutes at the end for revisions and editing.
* Consider writing your introduction last—do NOT waste a bunch of time trying to think of a catchy, interesting introduction. Instead, write out your thesis and move on to the body. Give yourself time to come up with an idea; often, at some point while you’re writing the body and rest of the essay, a good intro idea will come to you. Note it and then write your full intro when the rest of the essay is finished.
* Your conclusion is important but should be brief. Don’t waste time repeating in detail (summarizing) everything you just said in the body of the essay. Just repeat your thesis (in different words) and provide a closing thought (see handout on conclusions for ideas on closing thoughts). Go for about 3 sentences.
* If you get stuck on a point or get writer’s block while writing, leave lines blank and move on to the next paragraph. Be working on some part of the essay at all times; it doesn’t matter which order you do this in. Just keep writing.
* Don’t panic; just take it step by step and keep your eye on the clock

**Take the time to *outline*!**

* You will have between 5-8 minutes to outline, so keep your eye on the time; try not to go over 8 minutes.
* At least, write out your thesis as a complete sentence that includes the supporting points you will discuss.
* Even better, write out your thesis *AND* list your supporting points—the points you will discuss in your body paragraphs—in note form. You only need to make notes that are clear enough for you to remember what they mean; in other words, don’t waste time writing an outline composed of complete sentences.
* Spend most of your outlining time on body paragraphs—note generalizations (big, overall ideas) and—perhaps most importantly—the specific details and examples you want to include.
* Don’t be afraid to stop writing your essay at any point if an idea comes to mind—add it to your outline right away so you don’t forget it!

**Check your outline for common or obvious ideas and delete them or make them better**

* Check for ideas/answers that everyone else is also likely to think of first—change these to less common ideas and/or make each common/idea more specific somehow. Let me clarify….

1. Make an obvious/common point more specific:For example, if the question is how ESL students can learn English outside of the classrooms, the first things students think of are “talking to native speakers” or “making English/American friends,” “reading” or “watching movies or TV,” and “volunteering” or “joining clubs or organizations.” By themselves, these are obvious and common, but you could make them more specific by, for example, saying that a combination of reading the news, listening to it on the radio or online, watching it on TV, and reading the actual stories (text) will help you understand and learn the specific vocabulary of politics, world issues, economics, etc. and how to use objective language. Or, similarly, if you choose “watching TV,” you want to make the point specific by saying, for instance, what kind of specific language and vocabulary you could learn from different types of programs—i.e. slang and expressions from reality shows, mechanical language from car/auto shows, vocabulary about nature from Animal Planet or Discovery Channel shows, etc. See what I mean?
2. Choose better points (your 3rd, 4th, 5th, etc. ideas that come to mind):Teachers get B.O.R.E.D. of reading the same essay over and over and over—you want to surprise them with something new or a new perspective. Instead of choosing the common points I listed above, such as “talk to or make friends with native speakers” you could instead think a little harder about how YOU specifically learned something important about English—make it *personal*. (If it helped you learn, then it could help others right?) For example, when I was in Mexico, I made friends with the girl at the coffee shop specifically because she was friendly and offered to help me with pronunciations, vocabulary, word orders, and even general advice about being safe while I was there. Generally, when you ask for help and *try* to speak English (or Spanish, in my case), natives are excited and happy to help you and have respect for you for *trying* to use their language. All you have to do be friendly to someone who seems helpful at a place you visit often and the rest works itself out. As a second example, if your idea is to “have an American roommate,” *don’t write generally about learning English from him/her*; instead, focus on areas of interest that you have in common. For example, if you’re both gamers, you can explain how your roommate helps you learn vocabulary related to games, common expressions of competition, terms for strategies, expressions for losing or winning, how to not brag about your success, etc. If you both like shopping or going out to restaurants, you can learn from your roommate things like how to order, vocabulary about clothing, sales, prices, discounts, food (menus), and expressions for negotiating and making a complaint in a polite way. Finally, if you choose “volunteering,” explain who/what your volunteering for, what you do as a volunteer, who you interact with, and what specific vocabulary you can learn from this; for example, if I volunteered at an animal shelter or rescue center, I would learn all kinds of things to say to comfort people who have to surrender their pets, how to talk to prospective adoptees, how to be firm about adoption rules, how to speak to necessary people at agencies/organizations that offer the shelter funding, supplies, or aid, and so on. The point of all of this is: BE SPECIFIC! You can make an old point a new and interesting one by making it personal and specific, by saying specifically how you were helped, what you learned, what you gained, etc.

**Reserve time to revise & edit (VERY IMPORTANT!)**

* Focus on the big stuff first—adding details and explanations, moving sentences, deleting things, changing order of ideas, finishing your conclusion, etc.
* Focus on cohesion, unity, and transitions next—make sure your topic sentences and concluding sentences connect in language and content smoothly, make sure you repeat content words from your thesis and topic sentences, check for transitions between paragraphs and sentences, etc.
* The worry about the little stuff: grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, etc. Study the handouts and grammar lessons we’ve done so far in class: sentences, pronouns, SVAs, etc. and see the detailed list below.
* You can scratch/cross things out as much as you want as long as your corrections are clear.
* Use arrows or lines to show the order of sentences/words and to show you’ve inserted a word, phrase, etc.
* You can circle whole sentences or chunks of text and draw and arrow to place those sentences elsewhere—just make it clear where/when we (teachers) are supposed to read your sentences (in what order).
* Cross out words you need to correct and write corrections directly above them.
* Do whatever you need to do to correct your errors and make improvements; just make changes clear, even by writing notes if you need to (such as “the rest of this paragraph is at the end, after the conclusion” or “read this first” or “1,” “2,” “3,” etc. to show order of sentences or paragraphs).

**Don’t worry about appearances—your essay doesn’t have to look pretty on the page**

* We need to be able to read your handwriting, so make your letters clear.
* Do not write in all capital letters; capitalize the right letters in the right places or you could get marked down for sentence construction errors—if we can’t see where a new sentence begins because you use lowercase letters all the time, you *will lose points* because it will seem like one, big, long, continuous sentence.
* Indent each new paragraph clearly! If you don’t, you essay will look like it is one giant paragraph (instead of several), and *you will lose a lot of points for structure problems*.
* Make your punctuation marks clear—use darker ink or pencil to emphasize them and be sure to form them properly (you don’t want us mistaking a comma for a period, for example).
* Consider skipping lines (every other line) if your handwriting is big; this way, you will have room to add words, phrases, and sentences when you go back to edit.
* As long as we (teachers/readers/graders) can follow the order of your sentences, you are fine. If you want to add, delete, or move sentences around when you edit, just make these corrections clear by drawing arrows or otherwise indicating where a sentence or word or phrase is supposed to be. You can even change the order of paragraphs using arrows. If we can follow your arrows and read in the correct order, you’re good. Also don’t be afraid to cross or scratch words and sentences out. There are no points for “pretty” looking essays—just well written ones, even if they are messy, messy, messy.

**Other advice on various topics**

* Don’t bother writing a title because the teachers/graders don’t care about or even notice titles anyway.
* Write neatly enough so that we can read your writing! (If it’s unreadable, you’ll get a bad grade. This is because poor, unintelligible handwriting is the same thing as typing a paper for English class in your language or in symbols—we can’t grade what we can read or understand. Also, it shows the writer doesn’t care about his/her audience enough to make his/her words clear.)
* DO NOT repeat wording from the prompt; this is one of the teachers/graders “pet peeves”—use *your* words.
* DO NOT include proverbs, quotes, or references to anything that has been published in something like a newspaper. The reasons are that proverbs are overused by students and become annoying to readers, especially if they don’t fit with the topic well. Also, since you do not have any resources (like the Internet, books, media, etc.) with you during the test, citing/writing out a quote from such a source gives the impression that you are making it up or lying, especially if the quote/reference includes numbers like percentages or statistics. Just don’t do it. Please.
* BE ON TIME! When the test starts, you have 45 minutes EXACTLY to write your essay. If you’re late, you’ll have less time to write because you do get any extra time: the test STOPS AT EXACTLY 45 MINUTES FROM WHEN IT BEGAN. You won’t be given extra time beyond the 45 minutes. You will also disrupt the class and their concentration and annoy your teacher big time! (LOL ☺)
* You absolutely MUST stop writing at the EXACT MOMENT when the 45 minutes is up. No exceptions.

**TIMED WRITING PREP CHECKLIST: the long version**

Memorize this if you can. Write out the following points in short, note form in your words and try to memorize your list.

The Big Stuff to Remember & Other Advice…

**Take time to outline.** Students who do almost always do better on timed writing tests.

**Use an effective introduction strategy** that does NOT repeat words from the prompt, introduces the topic, and is designed to get the reader’s interest.

**State a clear thesis in the first paragraph**. FIRST: Does it clearly answer the prompt question? SECOND: Does it communicate an opinion or viewpoint that is logical, on topic, indicates clearly what the following body paragraphs will discuss, and is stated as clearly as possible? THIRD: Does it avoid announcements (like *I think, I believe, This essay will, My thesis is.., I will talk about…,* etc.) and is it expressed in the third person?

**Discuss your supporting points in the same order they are listed in your thesis**. Do body paragraphs match thesis?

**Order your supporting points in a logical way**. Should your rearrange any paragraphs or sentences more sensibly?

**Make topic sentences extremely clear**. Do they clearly, unmistakably state the point of the paragraph?

**Be sure all your topic sentences are stated as generalizations**. Are the main points in each paragraph that support the topic sentence also expressed as generalizations? Are they all logical statements?

**Make generalizations within paragraphs clear and check for specific, detailed explanations of them**. Each generalization should be followed by about 1-3 sentences of specific, detailed explanation and/or examples to illustrate the idea? (Follow the pattern of the “Canada” paragraph!) Remember: ask yourself these two questions to help you come up with specific, detailed content: look at your topic sentence idea and ask *how do I know this is true?* and *why do I know this is true?* THESE ARE THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR COMING UP WITH GOOD, DETAILED SUPPORT—remember these questions if nothing else!!!

**Always write concluding sentences for paragraphs that restate the point of the paragraph AND provide either a transition to the next idea or a closing remark**. At the end of each body paragraph, have you included a sentence or two that clearly connects the idea in the paragraph back to your thesis statement? Do the last sentences restate the topic sentence idea and also give a concluding remark/thought? (Ask yourself *how and why* the paragraph relates to and explains your thesis.)

**Check for cohesion, unity, and transitions.** If you do no other editing, please at least do this: check the first and last sentences of each paragraph to make sure they connect clearly to the thesis statement and that they connect to each other and transition smoothly—use content words throughout, repeat key words and their synonyms, repeat ideas by explaining them in new ways. Then, check to see if you have used a couple transition words in each paragraph to help connect sentences. Use every minute of the 45 minutes given to you; don’t finish early and just sit there. Take the time you have to make your essay as good as possible.

**Restate your thesis in a new way and give a closing though in your conclusion paragraph.** Remember: your conclusion only needs to be about 3 sentences, but it MUST accomplish these two things.

**Save time to revise & edit.** Use every minute of the 45 minutes given to you; don’t finish early and just sit there. Take the time you have to make your essay as good as possible.

Other Things to Consider and Be Aware Of…

**Remember your audience**: what might you know/understand but will need to explain to readers clearly?

**Use 1st and/or 3rd person point of view (POV)**: avoid 2nd person completely; use 1st person (for experiences, stories, etc.) and 3rd for general explanations.

**Avoid Announcements:** don’t include phrases like “I think” and “In my opinion” and “I believe” because they are obvious and unnecessary. Also avoid saying things like “This essay will discuss…” or “My points are…” or “In this paragraph, I will show” and so on and so forth. These kinds of statements are considered sophomoric.

**Do NOT Use Prompt Wording, Quotes, Statistics, Proverbs**: avoid these because they make you as a writer seem lazy and perhaps a liar—too careless to think of your own original support and fabricating information to support a point.

**Avoid oversimplifying/overgeneralizing:** avoid words like *all, every, everyone, always*, etc. because statements with these all inclusive words are rarely fair, accurate, or even true at all. Be careful that you don’t make issues or problems or concepts that are complex seem way simpler than they really are.

**Be sensitive about racial, gender, sexual, cultural, etc. issues:** be aware that some readers may not understand your cultural or religious beliefs, you may not understand theirs (or parts of theirs), you may not understand important things about certain age groups, professions, you might not comprehend the reasons for certain national or cultural problems or issues, and so on. Being unfairly judgmental or too quick to form a harsh opinion and be overly critical reflect badly on you and your ability to be fair, thorough and thoughtful as well as give the impression that your critical thinking skills are poor. Be aware that readers may be old, young, poor, wealthy, gay, straight, variously religious, disabled, mentally or emotionally ill, and so on. Also consider cultural, ethical, moral, and professions beliefs and practices if necessary. Take care not to say potentially hurtful, offensive, or rude things—for example, don’t say things like women over 30 are “old” and won’t be able to have children, make unexplained and unfair judgments about teachers or students or citizens, assert opinions directly and subjectively like “being gay is wrong” or “homosexuality is a sin” (because the teacher grading your essay might be gay!). Instead, try to explain your ideas objectively by focusing on what you’ve been taught and/or how your culture views sensitive issues—show the difference in ideas instead of judging others because they believe, think, or act differently from you.

Reserve Some Time to Revise & Edit—DO NOT THINK OF THESE AS A WASTE OF TIME…

Students who take a little time at the end of the time period to revise and edit also consistently do better on timed essays than those who do not. Pace yourself so you will have enough time (at least 5-10 minutes) to read your essay over and make as many improvements as possible before handing it in.

**Focus on the Big Stuff First**

* Check your first sentence, your thesis, your topic sentences, concluding sentences, and final sentence—make these as clear as possible first.
* rearrange/reorganize sentences and paragraphs to be most logically arranged
* clarify your generalizations and/or make sure they are clearly stated in the right places
* add details, sentences, explanations to clarify meanings
* improve word choices to clarify meanings
* delete anything unimportant, off topic, irrelevant, or unnecessary
* revisit your introduction (if you haven’t written it yet or if you want to really improve it)

**Check the Little Stuff Last**

* Check your sentences—you should have a variety of short and long sentences; use short sentences for emphasis and longer, more compound sentences to pair ideas that are equal or alike, complex sentences to group ideas that are unequal but related, and compound-complex sentences for complicated concepts or sequences of ideas.
* Check your pronoun references & agreements—do all pronouns refer to the correct nouns clearly and do they agree in number, person, tense, and gender?
* Check your subject-verb agreements—do all subjects and main verbs agree in person and tense?
* Check article use—have you used a/an, the, or no article where appropriate?
* Check your word choices and word forms—correct these by figuring out what part of speech the word should be (noun, verb, pronoun, etc.)
* Check capitalization, punctuation, and spelling—make it clear which words are capitalized, where and which punctuation marks you are using, and correct word choices and spellings.

Specific Advice on Thesis, Organization, and Support…

**THESIS/PURPOSE:** determine your thesis right away. Your thesis will usually be your answer to the prompt. Your thesis should contain a *controlling idea* – a key word or phrase that limits the focus of the essay and expresses your opinion/attitude toward the topic. It should also contain an *overview of the main points* you will make. Make sure you essay follows the structure indicated in your thesis.

**Example:** If you were asked what your favorite spare-time activity is and why, you could answer “backpacking,” but this answer alone doesn’t reveal your attitude toward the topic. In the sentence: “I enjoy backpacking in my spare time because it is both challenging and relaxing,” the descriptive words “challenging” and “relaxing” reveal both the writer’s attitude about the topic and how the writer will focus the response by providing an overview of the main points he/she will discuss.

**GOOD INTRODUCTION STRATEGIES:** often, writing an introduction is the trickiest part of a timed writing assignment. Here are some strategies to begin your paper that tend to work well for the kinds of prompts used for timed essays.

* **Give Background Information** – When writing on a general subject, such as economic conditions in the U.S.A., give some background information to help inform your reader about the basics of your topic.
* **Define a Key Concept or Term** – Beginning with a definition might be crucial to your reader’s understanding of your position on the prompt question. (However, avoid using a cliché opening like “According to Webster’s Dictionary…”)
* **Tell an Anecdote or Story** – Only begin this way when you have an anecdote or story that is obviously and directly related to the topic at hand.
* **Ask a Question** – Asking a question is the easiest way to begin an essay, but it is also the most clichéd. If you choose this method, try to come up with a creative question that will inspire your reader to read on.
* **Relate your Topic to Recent News or a Historical Event** – Mentioning a recent, well-known event in your reader’s mind can establish a connection between the subject and your reader, and, therefore, spark the reader’s interest.

**ORGANIZATION PATTERNS/STRUCTURE:** here are some common methods to arrange ideas logically in your essay.

* **Choose an Appropriate, Suitable Number of Points that Relate Logically to Each Other**
* **Discuss Ideas in the Same Order as they are Listed in Your Thesis**—if you choose to list the major points you will discuss in your essay in your actual thesis statement, make sure your body paragraphs follow that order exactly.
* **Use transitions & cohesive language techniques**—repeat key words from your thesis throughout your essay; also repeat key words from topic sentences within paragraphs. Don’t repeat exact wording (which is lazy); instead, use some synonyms.
* **Order of Climax**—ideas build toward a conclusion, saving the most important, dramatic ones for last.
* **Order of Complexity** –ideas are ordered from simple to complex.
* **Order of Familiarity**—ideas are ordered from the most familiar to the least familiar.
* **Order of Audience Appeal**—order points from “safe” (or more accepted ones) to challenging or surprising ones.
* **Order of Comparison/Contrast** – Whether a comparison-contrast essay stresses similarities or differences, it may be patterned in one of two ways: block or alternating (point-by-point) style.

**SUPPORT/CONTENT:** here are some tips on writing well-developed paragraphs. It may be helpful to review the handout on rhetorical strategies to help you remember and understand different methods of explaining ideas.

* **Begin by Introducing the General Topic and then State Thesis** – see the section above on introductions.
* **Have a Topic Sentence for Each Body Paragraph** – each body paragraph should be clearly focused by a topic sentence that expresses a single point that supports the thesis. Remember to repeat this idea (in different words) at the end as well.
* **Provide Appropriate Support** – for each paragraph by asking yourself “How do I know this is true?” Your answers to this question should help you to develop your paragraphs. Balance general explanation and specific details/examples.
* **Provide Clear, Concrete Support** –by including specific detail for each supporting point in the form of examples, anecdotes, illustrations, facts, personal knowledge, personal experiences, etc.

**For example**… If your thesis statement is “I enjoy backpacking because it is both challenging and relaxing,” perhaps your first point would be how you enjoy the physical challenge backpacking provides. A possible topic sentence could be this: “Because I was born with asthma, I’ve always been afraid of strenuous physical activity, but when I started improving at backpacking, I realized that I could overcome this limiting fear.” A strong essay would then go on to provide a concrete example of when the writer came to this realization. Was it reaching the end of a difficult trail for the first time without having an asthma attack? Was it after suffering an attack and then carrying on ten miles in the rain to successfully read his destination? Be as specific and detailed as possible in your support. If you can’t develop a point with evidence, then it’s probably best to replace that point with a stronger one.

**TIMED WRITING PREP CHECKLIST: the brief version**

Basics to remember…

Understand the prompt clearly.

Take a deep breath and calm down: you will live through this, I promise. ☺

Allow time to outline, write, revise, and edit by noting time limits and pacing yourself.

Move on to some other part of your essay if you get stuck at any point.

Outline at least the thesis and main points; add details and specifics if possible.

Introduction—is it interesting and accomplish what it should?

Thesis—is it clear, appropriate, show critical thought, and answer the prompt?

Overall Organization—do your body paragraphs match your thesis and is the order the most logical one?

Topic Sentences—are they extremely clear, state points of paragraphs, and relate to the thesis clearly?

Generalizations & Specific Details—are generalizations clear and is each followed by 2+ detailed explanations?

Appropriate Support—do your details and specific explanations answer *how and why* *do I know this is true?*

Concluding Sentences—does each end by restating topic sentence, relating to thesis, and a transition?

Internal Organization—are ideas/sentences arranged logically within paragraphs or should you rearrange?

Conclusion—is it 1-3 sentences that restate thesis in a new way and provide a closing thought for reader?

What to study and review…

Study introduction strategies—see introductions handout and information above; memorize 3-5 common strategies

Study previous practice tests—check my feedback for persisting weaknesses in content, purpose, support, and

organizations and try to be attentive to these

Study some patterns of organization—see handout on rhetorical strategies and organization patterns and info above.

Review expository paragraphs handout—learn the difference between generalizations and specific detail.

Review diction, description, and detail handout on descriptive paragraphs—pay specific attention to HOW to include

the right kinds of details as well as concepts like using specific nouns, strong verbs, and surprising comparisons.

Study conclusion strategies—see conclusions handout and choose 3-5 common strategies to memorize.

Study sentence structures—see the handout on the grammar page of the wiki; avoid sentence problems!

Study pronoun agreements and references—see handout from class (also on wiki)

Study subject-verb agreements—see handout from class (also on wiki)

Study any error that you often make in your writing—which composition errors do you often make? Errors in verb tense, pronouns, SVA, word forms, word choices, articles, etc. Memorize the top 2-3 most common errors you tend to make and be attentive to these when editing.